

WASHINGTON -- Inflation and high taxes are leading many Americans to question whether they are truly getting their money's worth from governmental agencies. However, staff members of one relatively new agency feel taxpayers are getting their money's worth--and more. The Federal Election Commission was established in 1975 to administer new laws requiring full public disclosure of the tens of millions of dollars spent in Federal campaigns.

During the 1978 Congressional elections, the FEC supervised reporting and disclosure of Federal campaign transactions totalling \$386 million. In 1976, the FEC monitored the distribution of some \$70 million in U.S. Treasury funds in the first publicly-financed Presidential campaign in U.S. history. And the Commission already is well down the road leading to the 1980 elections.

It successfully did all of this--and is doing all this--on a budget that is a relative teardrop in the sea of federal expenditures--just over \$8 million.

In the course of carrying out its enforcement responsibilities, the FEC has returned to the U.S. Treasury some \$3 million in fines and repayments.

The FEC has nothing to do with the printing of ballots, the counting of votes or the certification of winners in elections. These functions remain the prerogatives of state and local officials.

The FEC's mandate begins with full disclosure of contributions and expenditures in all contests for federal offices--Representatives, Senator and the President. In 1971, Congress passed the comprehensive Federal Election Campaign Act, amending it in 1974 to provide for an independent Federal Election Commission, refining it further through major amendments in 1976.

Ironically, the 1974 amendments passed the House of Representatives on August 8, the same evening that Richard Nixon resigned the Presidency over Watergate.

The FEC and campaign finance laws have come a long way in five years, opening campaign records to full public inspection. When the Commission receives a report of contributions or expenditures from a campaign or political committee, the information is microfilmed and made available for public viewing no later than 48 hours of its receipt.

In 1978 alone, this amounted to 125 million pages being placed on public record. But the Commission doesn't believe its job is limited just to filing documents. "The public must be given genuine access to those records," Chairman Robert O. Tiernan asserts.

The Commission worked long and hard to develop a workable disclosure system, and in 1978 responded to 25,000 individual requests for information, virtually all of which were met within 24 hours.

An additional 46,000 telephone requests from the general public, and some 6,000 calls from reporters around the country were handled by the Commission's small staff.

According to a 1979 Harvard University Study commissioned by the Committee on House Administration of the U.S. House of Representatives, the public disclosure portion of the Federal Election Campaign Act "can be judged an overall success--and much of the credit ought to go to the Federal Election Commission.

In addition to seeking compliance with election laws and ensuring full public disclosure of campaign financing, the Federal Election Commission monitors the distribution of public funds to Presidential candidates who reach the required threshold.

The public is most aware of this function through the dollar tax check-off on their federal income tax. "But," Chairman Tiernan says, "what the public may not realize is how diligently the Commission works to ensure that candidates have met the requirements of the law before we certify that they may receive these funds."

Each of the 15 Presidential primary campaigns, two national conventions and two general election campaigns that received public funds in 1976 has been audited by the FEC. As a result, one candidate was required to repay more than \$300,000 in public funds, and other candidates have been ordered to repay smaller amounts.

In order to make it easier for candidates to comply with the law in 1980, the Commission has already prepared guidelines for Presidential candidates who hope to qualify for public funds in 1980. And, unlike the 1976 election, the Commission already has in place the basic procedures and regulations under which candidates for Federal office--Senate and House as well as President--will run in the 1980 elections. "For the past six months we have been making changes, alterations and additions to these procedures and regulations based on the lessons we learned from the 1976 and 1978 elections," Commissioner Tiernan said. "Our effort is to seek to eliminate ambiguity, confusion and delay in the reporting processes

of the 1980 elections, and to help reduce election costs, both to the taxpayers and to the candidates."

In a recent Senate statement, Senator Claiborne Pell of Rhode Island, Chairman of the Senate Rules Committee, which oversees the work of the FEC, said: "I commend the Federal Election Commission for the many things it does right. I, for one, have been critical in the past and will continue to be so when I believe criticism is warranted. But I believe the Commission has a good grasp of the problems facing it and that it has learned from past mistakes...."

To that, Chairman Tiernan, himself a former member of Congress from Rhode Island, added:

"We try to cut costs, but we try never to cut corners on the American political system. We work hard to keep up with changes going on in American politics because our regulations have to pass the test of currency. The 250 employees of the Federal Election Commission work as hard as we can for the public good."